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—Jim Jager
Corporate Communications Manager
CIRI



Photo by Sasha Sagan

Summer Internship class of 2005.

First Alaskans Institute: A Helping Hand to Natives



Janie Leask
President/CEO

Teaching business skills, leadership and even etiquette, programs exist to help Native Alaskans in the professional world.

BY GAIL WEST

Among university internships across Alaska, the one offered by First Alaskans Institute stands out for its effort to straddle the fine line between cultures. Created in 2003, the internship program found a home in First Alaskans' Alaska Native Policy Center, and furthered the Policy Center's goal of impacting the education, economic and social policy issues that affect Alaska Natives.

"Byron Mallot started the program with a U.S. Department of Labor grant that Willie Hensley helped us get," said Janie Leask, First Alaskans' president and chief executive officer, "and it focused on the oil and gas industry. The first year, we had four interns. From that number, we've jumped to about 30 in 2006 and we anticipate 30 again this year."

LEADERSHIP KEY

Although this program, like others, has a large work component—hands-on experience in the students' fields of interest—it has a second aspect that sets it apart. According to Leask, it's called "Leadership Fridays," and offers students a connection with the history of their culture.

"We want these young people to develop leadership skills, as well as a profession," Leask said. "We want them to go back and create healthy communities, be successes in their communities."

During the 10-week summer internship, First Alaskans brings all the students in the program together every Friday. Through personal presentations or through webcasting, they

hear speakers on a variety of cultural topics—from the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), politics, the state's constitution and business topics to traditional leaders talking about cultural issues. They also find out about the legislative process from the Bush caucus, and about boards and commissions.

"In addition to the knowledge they get," Leask added, "they also have the opportunity to network among the speakers and among each other. They form their own special cohort."

EVEN ETIQUETTE

Leask said they surveyed their interns to see what they wanted to learn. "Interestingly, one of the first things they wanted was etiquette training. They said they wanted to know how to go to lunch with their mentors, which fork to use, and so on. So we invited a speaker from the university to give them etiquette training."

Two of the 2006 interns, Raina Thiele from Pedro Bay and Maniksaq Baumgartner from Barrow, paid particular tribute to the Leadership Fridays.

"I'd always had an interest in Alaska Native policy and federal government



Photo courtesy of First Alaskans Institute

Raina Thiele

policies, in particular," Thiele said, "and the speaker that had the most profound impact on me was Wilson Justin. He had opposed ANCSA, and gave me a perspective I hadn't heard before."

INTERNSHIPS

Baumgartner said he really appreciated the equilibrium between the leadership and cultural development and the real-world business experience.

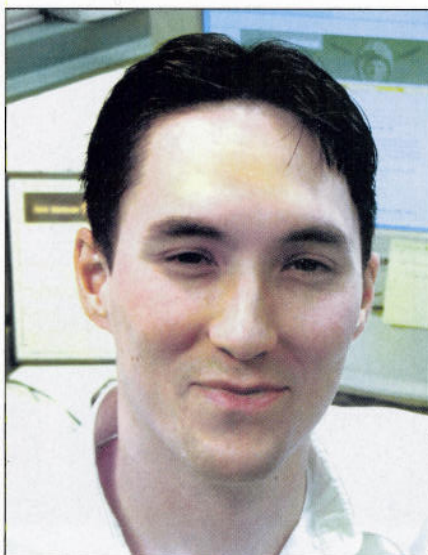
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Maniksaq Baumgartner's First Alaskans internship with CIRI led to a permanent position managing, among other things, CIRI's Web site.

"I thought the balance between the two was very good," Baumgartner said. "I walked out of the program with real-world business experience and a better sense of who I am as an Alaska Native."

Thiele entered the internship program after graduating from Yale in 2005

with a bachelor's degree in political science. Today, she's sizing up her options and said that after her training and her internship, she's leaning toward working for her village corporation's attorney.

Baumgartner, a senior in the Journalism/Public Communication program at the University of Alaska Anchorage, completed his internship with Cook Inlet Region Inc. in corporate communications in early spring of 2006, after CIRI extended the internship on a part-time basis so Baumgartner could complete his degree. After his graduation in May of 2006, CIRI extended a job offer, and Baumgartner is now a full member of CIRI's corporate communications staff.

Sarah Sherry, a program officer for First Alaskans, was the assigned mentor for Thiele, who interned at the organization and assisted with putting together the Alaska Federation of Natives Elders and Youth Conference. Sherry said the conference "was fantastic this year. We had a record-breaking number of participants, and a well-rounded agenda. Raina did an excellent job with it."

Baumgartner's supervisor at CIRI,

Jim Jager, corporate communications manager, said Baumgartner's internship gave CIRI the opportunity to evaluate Baumgartner's work.

"We were so happy with Maniksaq that we created a full-time job for him," Jager said. "Internships are very valuable to both employers and workers," he added. "One of the biggest mistakes I can make as a manager is to pick the wrong person for a job—bad hires are difficult to fix and they can lead to long-term career and workplace problems. Internship programs provide a good compatibility test that allows workers and employers to determine if a full-time job is in everyone's best interest. I'm impressed with First Alaskans' program because it recruits outstanding candidates and then gives them great learning opportunities."

First Alaskans recently recruited applicants for the 2007 internship program, which is funded by the Denali Commission and employer contributions, and plans to put 30 students through another work experience and a summer of Leadership Fridays beginning in June. □

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